DOWNWARD MOBILITY
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Luke 1:39-56

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What a story

The scene is tailor-made for an artist: the young Galilean peasant girl paying a visit to her elderly relative. The teenager, perhaps fourteen years old, bearing the awful and magnificent burden of pregnancy. She was nobody to begin with. Engagement to a stalwart carpenter had been a ray of hope for her, which was now perilously close to fading. Her shame could not be hidden indefinitely. Yet, for some strange reason she didn't feel ashamed. As a matter of fact, she was frequently giddy with joy. Instead of embarrassment, she was smiling a lot, sometimes laughing. Perhaps it was the dream she would never forget, could never, forget...The angel had said, "You will name him Jesus and he will be the Son of the Most High..." Of course, she made haste and hurried off to a town in the hill country of Judea. Who wouldn't head for the hills under those circumstances?

She fled, I think. It was no polite social call. It was a frightened, slightly overwhelmed teenager with nowhere else to turn. Luke gathers up all the tenderness and intensity in the meeting between the two by telling us that the child in Elizabeth's womb jumped for joy when Mary arrived on the scene. If there is anything more unlikely than a premature, adolescent pregnancy, of course, it is that Elizabeth and Zechariah, seventy or eighty years old, should become parents. Zechariah was struck dumb by the news that he was about to become a father, and we can understand that too.

It was a favorite scene for artists in the great age of faith. Perhaps you can recall seeing an interpretation: the room is properly and elaborately appointed, like a 14th century Flemish library. The sky is brilliant blue through a small window, and you can see angels gathered in a corner monitoring the encounter. Elizabeth is matronly, striking; Mary, much too old for her fourteen years, her face radiating peace, purity, serenity - all the virtues celebrated by the age of faith.

It has taken me a lot of years to appreciate that art because of its romanticism and unreality. I understand now that it's a way to preserve some distance between us and this strange meeting. Perhaps the reason is what comes next in Luke's account: what Mary says when Elizabeth greets her as the Lord's mother: the marvelous poem we know by the title Magnificat - from the first words in the Latin text. Perhaps it's a good idea to keep it as innocuous and remote as possible.

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What Mary said upon examination is more than a little disturbing. In fact, it is positively revolutionary. I have been told that it is illegal, and certainly unadviseable, to read the Magnificat in church in some countries today. South American Christians have testified that the Government calls the rectory and forbids the reading of the traditional Advent lection from Luke 1 on the grounds that it is subversive. A religious radio station in El Salvador was blown up recently, then shut down by the government.

The Bible illegal? The Virgin Mary subversive? Liberation theologians, many from South America, are pleading with American Christians to try to break out of our cultural milieux and hear Biblical texts from the point of view, say, of an El Salvadorian peasant, a young man whose father has been murdered by the Right Wing execution squads who are hired by the seven families who own the country, whose family is hungry and now without hope, who knows that the people who killed his father use American weapons and that those who pay them now live permanently in condominiums in Florida. How do you think the Magnificat sounds to him?

"...My soul magnifies the Lord.
he has scattered the proud
he has put the mighty down
and exalted those of low degree
he has filled the hungry with good things
and the rich he has sent empty away."

I submit that the Magnificat sounds different to most of the human race than it does to us. I submit that one of the enduring tragedies of our day is that we, who know more about human freedom, dignity and liberty than anyone in the world, consistently end up supporting, giving money and guns to the people who regard Mary's Magnificat as subversive. I submit that the enduring tragedy in this time is that the people with the most to lose, the ones with the heaviest investment in freedom have allowed Marxism a virtual monopoly on human liberation.

We do it by spiritualizing and romanticizing the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the same way the Renaissance painters portrayed the meeting between Elizabeth and Mary. But it won't fly for long. New Testament Christianity is materialistic. It doesn't begin spiritually, but with the most human event of all - a birth. Beginning with Mary's speech it has to do with fullness - spiritual fullness and physical fullness. It has to do with captive people set free, crippled people walking, and blind people seeing, hungry people eating, cold people being sheltered. Those are not always metaphors. Jesus did not deal with people metaphorically. He wanted to give them new life, life free from all the shackles which inhibit it. Sometime it meant healing, sometimes feeding, sometimes changing attitudes, beliefs; sometimes he comforted, sometimes argued. It was not an ethereal, spiritual vocation. The vocation of American Christians, punctuated during Advent, is to be permanently restless - not full of guilt because of what we have - but more than a little uncomfortable with a world that does not provide food, shelter, health care and dignity to the majority of its inhabitants.

Salvation, in the New Testament, personal salvation, has to do with the defeat of death and the promise of eternal life. It also has to do with fullness, peace, wholeness - now, in the present tense. And the way an individual gets it, is given it and sustains it, in the New Testament - is surprising. Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen described it imaginatively as "downward mobility". Nouwen suggests that the great paradox of the New Testament is that it portrays personal freedom as a product of "downward mobility". In a particularly good paragraph he wrote:

"God not only chose an insignificant people...not only chose a humble girl in an unknown town in Galilee...God also chose to manifest the fullness of divine love in a man whose life led to a humiliating death outside the walls of the city." (The Selfless Way of Christ, Sojourners, 6/14/81, p. 14)

Salvation, or if you prefer words like peace, happiness, fulfillment, self-realization, results from emptying, losing, going downward, according to Christian faith. Obviously there is honest tension that conflicts between that and the philosophy of our culture. The road to salvation here is the "ladder" to success. You get it by climbing up, struggling, battling, winning. "Upward mobility" is a kind of enchanted mantra, conjuring up visions of the "fast track" - power, prestige, promotion, celebrity. As an outsider, Nouwen, I have come to learn, often sees us with a particular clarity. He writes: "Our whole way of living is structured around climbing the ladder of success and making it

to the top. Our very sense of vitality is dependent upon being part of the upward pull and upon the joy provided by the rewards given on the way up." (ibid.) "Who ever got elected to office in this country," he asks, "by promising anything other than more money and more power?"

Social scientists are honing in on our obsession with power, our need to be biggest and best, forever number one, as the political and economic crisis of the age. It is fashionable to characterize American culture as incurably acquisitive, selfish, grasping, greedy, narcissistic. And if all you read about or saw of us was the advertising in the Sunday Times Magazine, that conclusion would be warranted.

I have a hunch, however, that we know better. I have a growing conviction that the people who know better than anyone else that success is not salvation are the successful. I have a hunch that the powerful know that there is no such thing in this world as "saving power": not economic power, not military power. We already know that the things we crave and are willing to give our lives for are not going to produce for us what we need and want most. Walter Bauman, good friend and professor at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, said recently that to be middle aged is to finally arrive and discover that you are irrelevant: to have the experience to run the world, but no longer to know how. It is to work very hard for 35 years, climb the ladder and to arrive at the managerial position of the branch office and to be told at 59 that you are no longer needed.

Simone de Beauvoir, Jean Paul Sartre's companion, lived passionately, fully, with existential abandon. In her later years she completed her memoirs and wrote this very poignant reflection: "I think with sadness of all the books I have read, all the places I've seen, all the knowledge I've amassed... The promises have all been kept. And yet...I realize with stupor how much I was gypped." (see Hans Kung, Does God Exist?, p. 693)

The social scientists don't have to scold us. We know that the deepest hunger in us is for salvation. We know that nothing fills that hunger but a word from God, a crumb of bread from the creator.

The God of the Bible is not a powerful potentate who stage directs the daily affiars of his world. The gods of ancient religions all look like that. Nor is the God of the Bible the safe abstraction of the philosophers. While others worshipped majestic power, Israel discovered a God who came down, lived among them, called them into a future but promised to walk on the road beside them. The God of the Bible personifies downward mobility.

Could it be another way? Can it be any other way? Someone sent me a superb essay recently from a Journal for Teachers, written by a Jesuit priest, "Breaking through the Cool". Father O'Malley laments the common plight of the High School teacher. "How can you give gifts to people who are convinced that they already have everything they need?" "What I am trying to sell is vulnerability," he says: "vulnerability to the truth, vulnerability to love." "But cool is the very opposite of vulnerable. How does one sell vulnerability to people who believe self-indulgence is the natural order of things?" I liked that. The trouble with the proud and powerful in Mary's speech, in the whole Bible for that matter, is not their pride and power, but the fact that they think they have what they need. The challenge of parenting or teaching is simply to impart the sense that there is something called truth which you don't have yet.

Father O'Malley's prescription caught my attention. "Intrude" he wrote. "Intrude" on their time. Break into their lives. And then the cricital nuance; once you have intruded, don't lecture or debate. They have developed a natural immunity to lectures. Become vulnerable.

"The one approach they are not used to, the one attitude against which they have not had to develope a defense is, ironically, vulnerability. If you are vulnerable to them, if you honestly and fearlessly confess your foibles, failings, even your falls, they are thunder-struck. They feel awe. And they are in danger of being humbled by your honest humility. They are in danger of love."

That's what Christmas is about. God becoming vulnerable. God taking the road of downward vulnerability. Henri Nouwen wrote, "In the center of our faith as Christians stands the mystery that God chose to reveal his divinity to us by submitting himself unreservedly to the downward pull."

We know, at Christmas, the immense power of honest humility, vulnerability. We have felt, many times, the dynamism, the compelling authority of love in the form of this newborn child. We know its truth, its relevance, its power. Something of God's love for us and his will for us is communicated because it became vulnerable.

What we may miss, is the fact that our salvation is in the same direction. The invitation is downward. Let this frightened Galilean girl teach you something about yourself and God and life this year. Let her teach you to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ by loosening your grip a bit, relaxing, slowing down a little, by reexamining your obsession to accomplish it all in the next few weeks. Let her teach you that this pervasive obsession with getting ahead, succeeding, winning, is a very poor substitute for wholeness.

You are invited, in Advent, to a conversion: to a personal revolution which reveals meaning, joy, peace, fullness in a surprising new direction; a direction intimated at by cow stalls, not royal palaces; a direction characterized by a journey to the little town of Bethlehem and a baby born out back in the manger. You are invited to become downwardly mobile this year, which might be the beginning of your salvation. Amen.